

# ALIQUANDO BONUS DORMITATE\*

*The unique atmosphere inside London's gentlemen's clubs survives. But are these elitist retreats past their prime or will they weather the changing times? By Paul Keers*

The great gentlemen's clubs stand, proudly but anonymously, along Pall Mall and St James's. From White's to the Carlton, from the Athenaeum to the RAC, they provide the ultimate places for gentlemen to drink, dine, doze or debate. And beyond their pillars and portals there survives a uniquely British institution. There is a marble-pillared, brass-plated, leather-bound world of libraries and smoking rooms, a world of dashing young blades and crusty old colonels, of pink gin and blue blood. It is a world which prefers a silver salt-cellar which doesn't pour to a plastic one which does.

The gentlemen's clubs originally grew out of coffee houses and gambling clubs. By the 19th century, they had become *pieds-à-terre* for gentlemen who lived in the country, with all the facilities of their own residence. They offered lunch and dinner, rooms for the night, and relaxation round the clock, a vintage port in a storm. And, of course, the membership policy ensured that you would only run into the right kind of people.

The gambling aspect survived for centuries in clubs like White's, where young blades would happily risk their inheritances on the turn of a card. An entire estate was gambled upon which raindrop would reach the bottom of the window first. When a man collapsed on the pavement outside the club, the members prevented him receiving medical assistance, on the grounds that it would prejudice the bets placed on whether he would live or die.

Other clubs attracted particular professions, such as gentlemen of the cloth, lawyers or politicians. The membership of the Naval and Military, or the Guards', are self-evident (although the same is not true of the Savage). And at the Travellers', they laid down that members must have travelled more than 500 miles, measured in a straight line, from London. That requirement still stands, although their diplomatic members nowadays are likely to travel that distance just for a weekend away.

(Mind you, it's a little difficult to understand the kind of person they originally hoped to attract, since they turned down applications from Lord Rosebery, Lord Crewe, Lord Randolph Churchill, Lord Lytton, and even that great traveller Cecil Rhodes. But whoever they got, it was hoped they were generally more Westernised than the traveller who, when asked by a club waiter what he would like, pointed at a wasp-catcher jar filled with syrup and insects and said 'Bring me some of that'.)

The clubs still stand as establishment bastions – expensive, elitist and, it almost goes without saying, essentially Tory in persuasion. At White's, Aneurin Bevan was kicked down the stairs for having the audacity to enter. And when Brooks's was bombed by the IRA, the astonishment of the members was equalled only

by the revelation that Len Murray was dining upstairs at the time.

And the stories about the crusty old membership have become legendary. Infuriated by the service, Lord Glasgow once hurled a waiter through a club window and into the flowerbed outside. 'Put him on the bill,' he growled.

So, let us assume that you are a successful man about town. You have a certain standing in society, and you know how to behave – you do not believe that *savoir faire* is a Bank Holiday event. How do you go about joining one of the hallowed clubs? Especially bearing in mind one famous remark that, in order to get in, 'you have to be a relative of God – and a damn close relative at that'.

To begin with, you need to be proposed and seconded by existing members. Some clubs go even further; at White's, for example, your application has to be supported by no less than 20 members. And then, the club will *consider* your application. Perhaps the Garrick has summed up most precisely the membership policy of clubland: 'It is better that 10 unobjectionable men should be excluded,' they believe, 'than one terrible bore should be admitted.'

Many clubs display the names of prospective candidates in a book, where other members can sign alongside the proposer and seconder to indicate their approval. Or, indeed, the opposite. In 1984, Peter Walker and Michael Heseltine, both Cabinet Ministers at the time, were proposed for membership of Pratt's. They suffered enormous embarrassment when beside their names was written simply, 'Vulgar little \*\*\*\*\*'

'Blackballing' (or 'pilling' as it's known in clubland) is the traditional process of voting in members by placing white balls in a box to indicate approval. The presence of a black ball means that someone has vetoed their application. If you *are* blackballed, you're in good company. Sir Arnold Weinstock, the industrialist, was blackballed at Brooks's. Rocco, the son and heir of Lord Forte, was rebuffed at White's. And in a particularly famous episode, Bernard Levin was turned down by the Garrick. The only consolation is that someone in the club must at

## \*THE GREATEST

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least know something about you; it's said that many people get in simply because no-one has heard of them!

And then you begin a long wait. The waiting list at many clubs is around five years; if you're a rising star when you apply, you should be at your peak by the time they let you in. As David Puttnam, stuck on a six-year waiting list, said, 'The day the MCC lets me in, I can really feel I'm a success.'

Initially it can be quite cheap to join one of the clubs. If you're under 30, many of them offer special fees of less than £100 a

year, on the 'catch 'em young' principle. But that soon rises up to regular membership fees, which are in the £250-£400 bracket (often with a similar payment in addition, as a one-off 'joining fee'). It seems to support G K Chesterton's old adage that: 'The *rules* of a club are occasionally in favour of the poor member. The drift of a club is always in favour of the rich one.'

But what perks do you receive for your sum? Sadly, few of the clubs have food which merits the membership fee. At the Athenaeum, the painter Landseer examined his steak and said gloomily, 'They do say there's nothing like leather...' And the Athenaeum is where that infamous fish was served, 'the piece of cod that passeth all understanding'.

If you want to stay overnight in London nowadays, the top hotels can provide you with better facilities. And as time and money have become inextricably intertwined, many gentlemen balk at the thought of wrestling with the traffic in getting from business in the City to pleasure in St James's.

But admittance to one of the Pall Mall clubs offers admittance to some of the most powerful circles in Britain. The top professionals and politicians, the academics and aristocrats, all belong to one of the London clubs. There is no more impressive place to take a guest for dinner – and nowhere else where the conversation at the bar regularly pits the Cabinet against the top clergy, or the most successful businessmen against Oxbridge dons.

And nowhere else does that unique atmosphere survive, where porters and servants remember the name of every member, and treat them with a respect that has survived from the era of the true gentlemen. Beneath the newspapers in the smoking room the colonels gently doze, the public figures pen their letters to *The Times*, and the politicians plan their strategies over a G&T.

There are those who say that the clubs are in decline. Recent years have seen several closures and amalgamations, as property prices in St James's have soared. Fees have risen out of the reach of the gentry, out even beyond the bank balances of the *nouveau riche*, and the old members complain that clubs are both beyond their pockets and past their prime. As one clubman complained, 'They can't even keep in the men they used to keep out.'

But if the gentlemen's clubs are in their twilight, what better time to enjoy one of their whiskies and soda? It means that clubland's hinges are a little better oiled these days. At certain clubs, you can exert a little less pull, and the doors will still open.

Unless, of course, you're a woman. The gentlemen's clubs remain, on the whole, for gentlemen, and that seems unlikely to change. In an episode which seems to sum up all the crusty traditions of Pall Mall, members of one club were asked to vote on the admission of women. The ballot paper offered members three alternatives: Yes; No; and Good God, No.

## THE KINGS OF CLUBS

**Garrick** A combination of wigs, wits, and West Enders, typified by Sir Michael Havers and his actor son, Nigel. Its Covent Garden location places it ideally for theatre-land, Fleet Street and the Law Courts, and while Pall Mall still looks down upon 'writer chappies', most of the senior scribes like Kingsley Amis and Alan Ayckbourn, together with modern minds like Melvyn Bragg and Richard Attenborough, are members of the Garrick.

**Royal Automobile** Not a little box containing an emergency telephone, but a beautiful building on



BEHIND THE ATHENAEUM'S EXCLUSIVE DOORS

Pall Mall which contains, along with the usual club-rooms and dining rooms, the unique facility of a large and stately swimming pool. Members range from Lord Matthews and Andrew Knight to Sir Harry Secombe and Peter Ustinov.

**Boodle's** Ian Fleming lunched here almost every day, and it's reputedly the model for James Bond's club, Blades. They once had a rule that, because of its contact with the common classes, any silver given to a Boodle's member had to be boiled first, and then dried by swinging it in a leather bag. This habit is not remembered by members such as General Sir Frank Kitson and Lord Orr-Ewing.

**White's** When Beau Brummel sat each day in its elegant bow window, looking out upon St James's Street, this was the most famous club in London. Now, its aristocratic membership includes Patrick Lichfield and Angus Ogilvy, with General Sir John Hackett, Norman St John Stevas and Sir Ian Gilmore also on the lists. Elegant and extremely elitist, it was once dubbed 'an oasis of civilisation in a desert of democracy'.

**MCC** A gentlemen's club in all but location, and perhaps therefore the only sense in which Marylebone lords it over St James's. Exclusive access to the Pavilion compensates for the hideous

tie, and there's live entertainment when conversation flags. A membership which ranges from Sir Laurence Olivier to Jeffrey Archer makes this one of the most eclectic of clubs.

**Carlton** The major political gentlemen's club. The membership includes Heath, Heseltine, Brittan . . . need one say more?

**Athenaeum** The serious old establishment – judges, senior clergy and even the walls have peers. Most top academics are members, such as A J Ayer, A L Rowse and George Steiner, along with top clergy including the Archbishop of Canterbury. Sir Robin Day, Lord Denning and Sir Alec Guinness also subscribe to this bastion of Pall Mall authority.

**United Oxford & Cambridge** Home from home after the comforts of college. All graduates are now encouraged to join, so the membership's a real mixture. The club will supply membership lists, so that candidates can look for suitable proposers and seconders for themselves.

**Travellers'** A convivial haunt of diplomats and travellers. The scene of a bizarre suicide, of a member whose trip to Japan had left him with 'a characteristic indifference to life' (!). When found, with his brains blown out, the Secretary exclaimed, 'Well, I'll take damn good care he never gets into another club I have anything to do with!'

**Beefsteak** Perhaps the most idiosyncratic of the top clubs, housed in an upstairs room near Leicester Square. Members sit at a long dining table and eat – you guessed it – steak. The attraction is not so much the simple food, but the conversation, between members like Sir Michael Havers, Auberon Waugh, Donald Sinden and Lord Dacre.

**Savile** Another artistic club, shunning St James's for the fringes of Mayfair. Pens in this Brook Street bureau include Frederic Raphael, Keith Waterhouse, Leo Rosten and Frank Muir.

**Brooks's** a bastion of tradition in the heart of St James's, where old money meets new power, and financial and political advice is traded between Lord Carr, Sir Robin Leigh-Pemberton, Andrew Knight, Lord Zuckerman and Roy Jenkins.

**Consul Club** American Express Cardmembers have their own haunt in the Haymarket. Membership (on application) gives them a club suited to social meetings as well as a working base with facilities on hand that include IBM personal computers, telex and fax machines. There is also a desk for all travel arrangements and another for money, cheques and foreign exchange. Members here are automatically members of the Consul Clubs in Brussels, Frankfurt, Moscow, Paris and Rome.

**St James's** Established seven years ago by a consortium of thespians headed by Sir John Mills, Roger Moore, Michael Caine and Liza Minelli, this art deco club off St James's is also residential. Members, male and female, can use the St James's clubs in Antigua and Paris as well. Next year the Los Angeles version opens. □